

## **THE BREMERTON SUN**

**November 30, 2003**

Beginning in June 2002, The Sun devoted an unparalleled amount of staff time and newsprint to an eight-month examination of methamphetamine problems in Kitsap County.

Recently, The Meth Toll series was honored with national and regional recognition for journalistic excellence.

Even while The Sun's series was being published, various local agencies and authorities were launching their own initiatives -- new programs aimed at fighting meth and its impacts in our communities.

The problem seemed overwhelming. Washington state was ranked No. 1 in the nation in numbers of meth lab busts per capita, and among our state's 39 counties, Kitsap is near the top.

Drugs are involved in 80 percent of all serious crimes here, and most of the time, the drug is meth. Of approximately 1,500 prosecuted here annually, 90 percent involve meth.

Victims of meth-related crimes pay a high toll in financial, emotional and sometimes physical harm. Those who have been burglarized might lose thousands of dollars in possessions. Victims of violent crimes might need hospitalization and rehabilitation.

We -- all of us -- also pay indirectly for the meth epidemic in health care and health insurance costs, higher premiums for homeowners and auto insurance, and, of course, in our tax dollars used to deal with meth's multi-faceted impacts on our society.

None of that has changed in the 17 months since The Sun began its probe of meth problems in Kitsap County.

But overall, some measurable progress has been made toward winning the war on meth:

- There seem to be fewer meth labs. The WestNET enforcement team has busted about 30 labs so far this year -- as compared to 44 at this point in 2002. It's the first time in recent years there's been a decrease.
- A Mexican drug ring responsible for half the meth sold in this region has been broken up, and its leaders convicted.
- Kitsap County commissioners have given preliminary budget approval to \$35,000 for resources to educate the community and help meth addicts and their families.

- Previously, meth addicts having psychotic episodes were sent to Harrison Hospital's emergency room, treated and returned to the street. That costly, ineffective process has been replaced by a triage center operated by Kitsap Mental Health, Kitsap Recovery Center and Harrison Hospital.

For addicts fighting their own meth devils, there have been victories and defeats. Most of those originally profiled by The Sun reported progress toward recovery -- but at least one fell back into meth use, and into prison.

For the methamphetamine problem, there are no clear or conclusive answers. Instead, there is a long war, fought on many fronts, that only can be won by unrelenting resolve and often-costly commitment of resources.

And just as in any war, "civilians" in the community can play a role. Alert residents can report suspicious activity in their neighborhoods. And all of us who associate with youth can help discourage drug use and encourage more healthy, positive lifestyles.

We urge you to read today's update on the impacts of methamphetamine in our community.

And we hope you'll join us in commending and supporting all those involved in this war that -- ultimately -- we must win.

## **METH REVISITED**

### **Still a battle**

Key indicators show progress, but the fight isn't over

**Julie McCormick**  
Sun Staff

**November 30, 2003**

## **TOP PRIORITY**

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The methamphetamine epidemic may have peaked in Kitsap County and the state, but it's way too early for anyone to be willing to declare victory.

The signs are mostly hopeful, though, with a few dark clouds on the horizon.

Police are finding fewer local manufacturing labs and the number of drug cases is slightly down. An anti-drug task force is about to launch a community education effort, and the new crisis center for drug-related emergencies is up and running.

There's another new court program for drug users and, despite state budget constraints, the promise of more money for treatment once offenders are released from prison.

Here are some key indicators of progress in the fight against meth use and trafficking, along with recent developments in local response:

## **Meth labs**

The number of lab busts in Kitsap County and the state is falling for the first time in years, whether you look at law enforcement numbers or state and local clean-up reports.

The West Sound Narcotics Enforcement Team, an interjurisdictional group of local police, busted 30 labs by November, about a third fewer than the 44 busted by the same time last year.

The price of meth on the street is up by more than half, an indicator of short supply.

Detective Sgt. Randy Drake, who leads WestNET, attributes reduced availability of the drug to the bust-up earlier this year of the Muñoz Muñoz organization.

A five-year investigation by federal, state and local authorities ended in convictions for leaders of the Mexican drug ring, which was responsible for half the meth sold in Kitsap County and on the Olympic Peninsula during its heyday.

No one has stepped in to take their place, Drake said.

No one knows exactly why local production has fallen off, though.

"I think the main thing is people are getting worn out," Drake hypothesized. "You can only do this sort of thing for so long. Maybe it's starting to run its course."

That theory doesn't satisfy Sgt. Tom Zweiger of the Washington State Patrol.

Zweiger works for the statewide Meth Initiative, which uses federal funds for cooperative efforts at the local level to combat meth.

The recent creation of meth action teams in every county has had a big impact, Zweiger said, through a unified effort by multiple agencies focused on prevention and treatment, not law enforcement.

"We haven't changed anything else about the way we do business," Zweiger reasons.

But he cautions that the only user data available -- admissions to state-funded treatment programs -- shows no decrease in the numbers of meth users.

## **Drug Interdiction Task Force**

Kitsap County Prosecuting Attorney Russ Hauge two years ago convened a huge group from every local agency dealing with the drug problem.

Their first job was to attack the meth epidemic.

In a community survey last year, county residents named drug use as their No. 1 concern and said government wasn't doing enough to combat it.

This year, the Kitsap County Board of Commissioners has given preliminary budget approval for \$35,000 toward a community outreach effort to educate people about meth and the resources available to help addicts and their families.

The campaign will begin next year and include broad distribution of The Sun's series, The Meth Toll.

## **Crisis Triage Center**

Officials at Kitsap Mental Health, Kitsap Recovery Center and Harrison Hospital are in the process of assessing the new triage arrangement at the recovery center to decide if it continues.

It's the first cooperative arrangement between the three with a place -- special beds at the recovery center -- for people in crisis who may need both mental health and substance abuse help. They previously ended up at the hospital emergency room, a costly non-solution.

Lisa Romwall at the recovery center said the incidence of meth use among the 30 people who come through each month has decreased slightly.

## **Mentally Ill/Chemically Addicted (MICA) programs**

Kitsap Mental Health and Bremerton Municipal Court in July started working together on a special program for mentally ill people who are also chemically dependent but couldn't succeed in the large group settings of traditional programs.

Because they couldn't meet court conditions, they kept coming back and were at risk for jail time.

The experiment seems to be working so far, said Ian Coen, the probation officer.

One man with a drunken driving conviction from 1989 had never made it through any previous program. "This is the first time I've seen him sober," Coen said.

Seven of nine people in the program are meth users, two list cocaine as their primary drug and most also abuse alcohol.

There's been some preliminary talk of expanding the program to other courts, and Coen said it's the first of its kind in the state.

## **Family Drug Court**

A Kitsap County Superior Court pilot alternative sentencing program is awaiting its fate.

Family Dependency Drug Court, which helps offenders with drug problems restart their lives and regain custody of their children, has been operating with three participants and their families.

But Kitsap County was denied a federal grant that would have helped the program expand to include 20 to 25 participants, said Cherie Lusk, who coordinates the county's drug court programs.

The county is currently looking for other ways to fund it.

Participants receive drug treatment, counseling and parenting classes. One woman has regained custody of her son and another participant has been given expanded visits with his year-old son.

## **Treatment**

The state Legislature last year approved a measure to reduce the sentences for non-violent drug offenders and transfer much of the savings to local treatment programs.

The early release process got speeded up this year, and another \$106,000 is earmarked for Kitsap County in 2004 to expand treatment for newly released offenders.

In future years, the amount available for treatment will double.

Prosecutor Russ Hauge said lawmakers left a gap in the process, however, that will put a lot of people onto the streets without community supervision before treatment programs can expand to help them.

He fears a mini-crime wave will result.

Budget considerations also resulted in a 25 percent reduction this year in the amount of federal money available for Meth Initiative work.

Just as things seem to be looking up for the forces fighting the meth war, government budget woes could restrict their ability to wage it.